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ABSTRACT

The older job seeker faces both external and internal barriers in finding employment. External barriers include such economic and societal obstacles as age discrimination, rapid technological changes and the shifting demands of the job market. Internal barriers include diminishing job seeking motivation and limited job seeking skills. A conceptual model of job-seeking behavior based on expectancy theory which examines the interplay between internal and external barriers was used to guide a study of 278 job seekers aged 50. To obtain a national probability sample of active job seekers a combination of random digit dialing and multiplicity linkage sampling strategies was used to generate the difficult-to-identify study sample. The preliminary data have indicated that older job seekers have benefited from enhanced job-seeking skills. A majority of respondents also expressed a willingness to be trained in these skills; even greater numbers expressed interest in training for second careers and for skill upgrading. The findings suggest that further efforts should be directed to the identification of optimal training approaches, the role of group supports in the job search and career change, and the potential contribution of higher education to extending the work-life of older persons. (Author/NRB)

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BARRIERS AND SUPPORTS IN THE JOB SEARCH: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM A SURVEY OF OLDER JOB SEEKERS

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Introduction

Older job seekers face a formidable array of societal and economic barriers in their search for re-employment. Among the problems they face are: ...age discrimination based on stereotypes of older workers as being less cost-efficient, more difficult to train, and poorer performers than younger workers

...rapid technological changes which speed up the process of skill obsolescence

...their over-representation in static or declining blue-collar industries (e.g. agriculture, construction, automotive, steel) and their under-representation in white-collar growth industries (e.g. petrochemical, data-processing and electronics)

...their high concentration in geographic regions characterized by industrial decline coupled with their limited ability to uproot and move where the new jobs are

...the limited assistance given to older job seekers by such "gate-keepers" as public and private employment services.

An older job seeker confronted with such obstacles might well be inclined to give up in despair. Unfortunately, this is exactly what often happens. Many older persons would accept employment but are not actively searching for work because they feel that no jobs are available for them. Technically, such persons are considered "discouraged" workers. The rate

of discouragement has been shown to be especially pronounced among older workers. (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1978) Since discouraged workers are considered to be out of the labor force, unemployment rates do not accurately reflect the problems of the older job seeker. Thus, in addition to overcoming external barriers the older job seeker must also overcome the internal danger of loss of job seeking motivation.

Another obstacle often faced by older job seekers is their competitive disadvantage relative to younger job seekers in terms of essential job seeking skills. For example, it has been shown that older people perform more poorly on employment related tests despite no significant age differences in actual job performance (Arvey & Mussio, 1973; Jenkins, 1972). Their lowered measured ability often reflects greater anxiety and limited test taking ability. In a sense this isn't surprising considering the amount of time which has elapsed since the older job seeker has last had to take such tests. Similarly, it has been shown that older workers use fewer job seeking techniques and check with fewer information sources for job openings than do younger job seekers (Sheppard & Belitsky, 1966). One encouraging note in the pioneering study by Sheppard and Belitsky is that when younger and older job seekers used similar job finding strategies, differences in re-employment rates for the different age groups become less pronounced. In any case, it is reasonable to conclude that older job seekers are also handicapped by their limited repertoire of effective job seeking skills.

It should be noted that the latter two obstacles of discouragement and limited job seeking skills differ in a significant way from the barriers enumerated at the start of our discussion. Unlike the relatively immutable barriers imposed by adverse societal or economic conditions, the psycho-social problems of diminished motivation and skills seem more amenable to successful modification.

Our interest in better understanding the modifiable aspects of job seeking behavior lead us to undertake a study of persons 50 or over who are looking for work. The purpose of this currently ongoing study is threefold;

...to describe the characteristics of older job seekers and the job seeking strategies they use

...to identify those characteristics and strategies which are most predictive of job finding outcome

...to monitor the changes which take place during the course of an older individual's job search.

Theoretical Model of Job Seeking Behavior and Outcomes

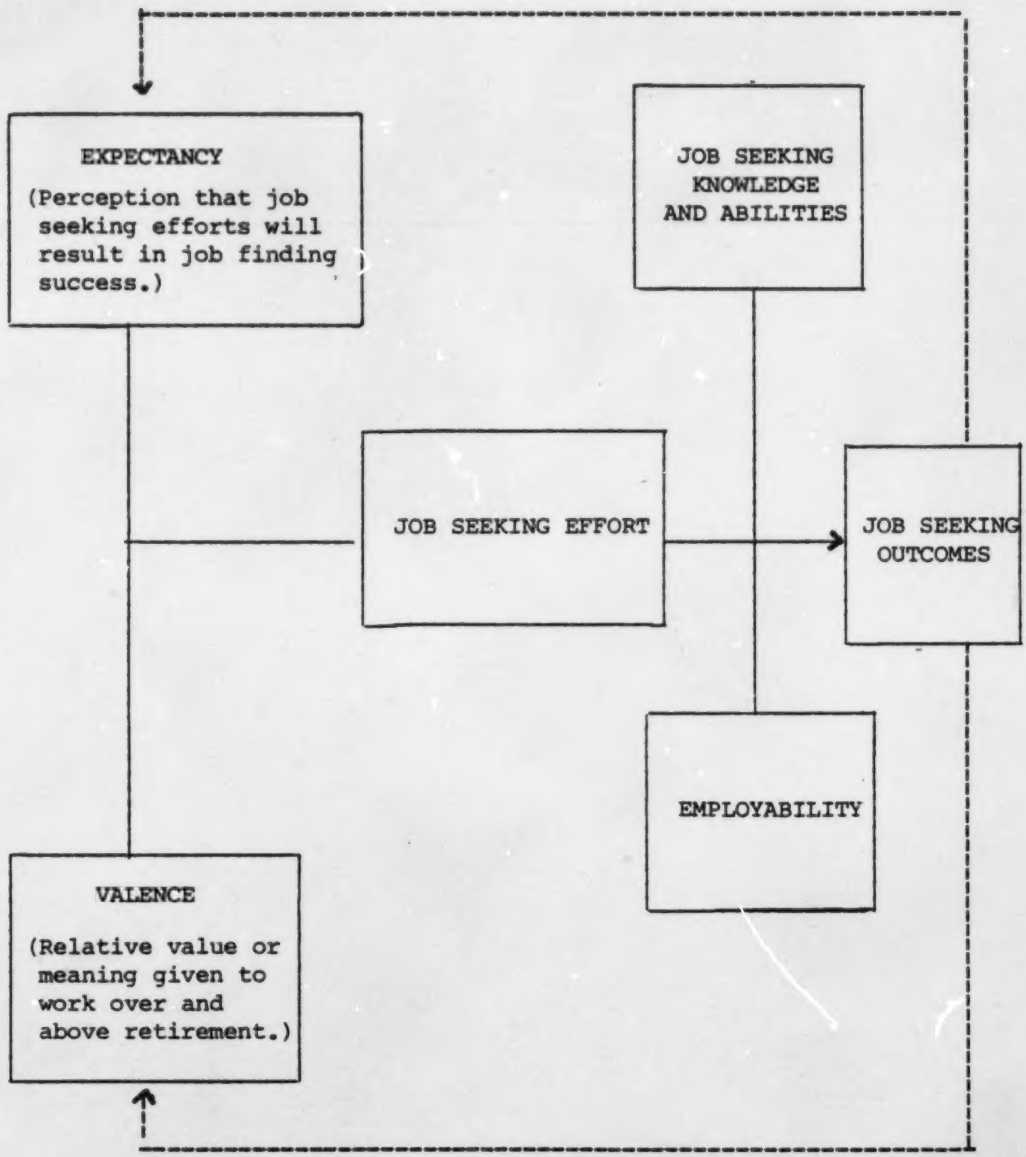
In order to guide the study we sought to develop a theoretical model of job seeking behavior and outcomes. Factors likely to affect the job search were integrated using a conceptual approach based on expectancy theory. Expectancy theory has become the predominant conceptualization guiding studies of worker motivation and job performance. However, its logic was deemed equally applicable to the explanation of job seeking behavior. Essentially, expectancy theory starts from the widely accepted premise

that any level of behavior or performance is primarily determined by both an individual's motivation to perform and also by the individual's ability to perform. Expectancy theory primarily attempts to help clarify what is meant by the concept of "motivation to perform" in the above premise. Stated in its simplest form, Vroom's (1964) version of expectancy theory posits that motivational force to exert effort on any behavior is a multiplicative function of 1) the expectancy that the effort will result in achieving certain outcomes and 2) the valence or value placed on attaining these outcomes. In our case of job seeking behavior, expectancy theory would predict that the degree of job seeking effort is a function of; 1) the expectation that such effort will actually result in finding a job as well as 2) the valence or value the individual places on finding a job.

At this point it may be helpful to diagram the emerging components of the conceptual model. As will be noted from Figure 1, the degree of effort expended on the job search is seen as related to the belief that such efforts will actually result in finding work. Where the job seeker believes that chances for success are limited by major barriers (e.g. age discrimination, unfavorable economic conditions, skill obsolescence, lack of supports) then his or her effort is likely to be low. Conversely, a strong belief in eventual success is likely to elicit and sustain a high level of effort in the job search.

The degree of job seeking effort is also shown to be conditional upon the value placed by the job seeker on the outcomes associated with different

Figure 1


EXPECTANCY
(Perception that job seeking efforts will result in job finding success.)
JOB SEEKING KNOWLEDGE AND ABILITIES
JOB SEEKING EFFORT
JOB SEEKING OUTCOMES
EMPLOYABILITY
VALENCE
(Relative value or meaning given to work over and above retirement.)

Conceptual model of factors affecting job seeking effort and job seeking outcomes.

effort levels. Two possible outcomes are of major interest in this case. The first is that of persisting in the job search, obtaining a job, and remaining in the labor force. A second outcome is to give up the job search and accept early labor force withdrawal or retirement. Therefore, the degree of job seeking effort will also depend upon the value placed by the individual on remaining employed over and above that of labor force withdrawal. Here such issues as the meaning of work and retirement are crucial. To the degree that the positive values associated with working outweigh the positive values associated with not working, job seeking effort can be predicted to increase. The model would also suggest that when the benefits of retirement begin to outweigh those of working then job seeking effort will show a decline. Consequently, a full understanding of the older job seeker must clearly consider for each individual the perceived meaning and value of work contrasted against the value placed on retirement or labor force withdrawal.

To this point, the model has highlighted the factors influencing the older persons' level of effort expended on the job search. However, we are all aware of the fact that a high level of job seeking effort does not necessarily guarantee job finding success. Recalling our earlier premise, we noted that performance is a function of both motivation and ability. Thus, the conceptual model must also incorporate the individual's level of job seeking knowledge and ability. As previously noted, older workers are likely to exhibit less efficient job seeking strategies than younger workers.

This limitation in ability may be due to a variety of related factors such as lack of recent job seeking experience, limited support by job "gatekeepers", job interview anxiety, and poor test taking practices. Whatever the causes, limited job seeking knowledge and abilities are seen as diminishing the relationship between job seeking effort and success. On the other hand, efficient job seeking skills can enhance the likelihood of success even with lesser expenditure of effort.

Up to now the model has focused exclusively on characteristics of the job seekers' psychosocial perceptions and abilities. However, it would be naive to assume that the outcome of the job search is entirely determined by the characteristics of the individual job seeker. Success is also determined by many factors over which the individual has no control at all. Some might even argue that these uncontrollable factors explain most of the variance in job seeking outcome. Even without going so far, it is obvious that these elements must be recognized in the model. Clearly, job seekers may be both highly motivated and highly skilled in job seeking strategies,yet will still be unsuccessful if employers have no desire to hire them. Thus, the final component of the model has been labelled "employability" and is seen intervening between job seeking effort and job finding success. Conceptually we have defined employability as the degree of congruence between the older job seekers' market

skills and employers' need and preference for older workers with such skills. In extreme cases, job finding success might be entirely determined by employability factors. Of all the elements in the model, employability cannot be affected by intervention directed at the individual but generally requires societal level solutions.

It should be noted that the theoretical model is dynamic rather than static. This is indicated by the feedback loops represented in Figure 1 by broken lines. For example, repeated job seeking failure may be expected over time to diminish the expectancy of finding work in the future. On the other hand, success is likely to increase ones perception that future job seeking is also likely to be successful. Job seeking outcomes may also result in a re-assessment of the valence or value placed upon work. Job seeking failure may be expected to result in a downgrading of the value of work and an upgrading in the value placed on retirement. The reverse might be expected to result from job finding success. The dynamic nature of the model over time suggests that an adequate understanding of job seeking behavior and outcomes requires ongoing monitoring of the job seeking process.

Methodology

Using the conceptual model helped in developing an appropriate methodological approach to the objectives of the study. Unlike cross-sectional designs it was felt that the study should follow a group of older job

seekers over a period of time. A two-wave research design was developed in recognition that important changes may occur during the process of the job search. It was, therefore, decided to interview job seekers at one point in their job search and then follow them up six months later.

Another set of methodological considerations had to do with eligibility criteria for sample selection. Those job-seekers who had already become discouraged, even though available or interested in work, were deemed inappropriate for inclusion in the Time 1 interview. In this respect we followed the distinction used by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to differentiate between unemployed workers and those not in the labor force. To be eligible for study a respondent had to have engaged in a clearly identifiable job seeking behavior during the preceeding four weeks. Such behaviors could include registering with public or private employment agencies, writing application letters, inquiring about jobs from friends or relatives, placing or answering job ads, listing oneself in a professional or union register, etc. Those saying that they were interested in work who hadn't undertaken an identifiable job seeking behavior during the past month were excluded. The only other eligibility criteria was the respondent be at least 50 years old.

Having decided to study active job seekers aged 50 and over, the next issue faced was how such a specialized and limited sample could be identified. The first possibility explored was obtaining access to older

job seekers who were clients of public or private employment agencies. However, this approach was rejected for a variety of practical and conceptual reasons. Such agencies rightfully are required to respect the privacy of their clients which limits research access. Equally important, such an approach would have excluded from consideration a large number of job seekers who do not use placement services. Also excluded would be those who rely exclusively on informal inquiries through friends or relatives, direct contact with employers, and a variety of other job seeking strategies.

The sampling strategy actually selected involved screening a national random sample of households to determine if an eligible respondent resided there. Working with the Louis Harris firm, it was decided to pose eligibility screening questions to the thousands of households the firm is constantly contacting for a variety of cross-section surveys. Random digit dialing was used to generate a sample in which every household in the nation had an equal chance of being selected. After a few weeks in the field it became apparent the random digit dialing alone would have to be supplemented because of the extremely low incidence rate of identifying an active job seeker aged 50 or over in any given household. The supplemental sampling strategy employed is referred to as multiplicity linkage sampling (Fine, Rothbart, & Sudman, 1979; Sirken, Graubard, & Lavalley, 1978). This procedure enables potential respondents to be enumerated at households other than

their own. In the present study persons could nominate a parent or sibling 50 or over looking for work even if the candidate did not live in their household. It should be pointed out that despite any superficial similarities, multiplicity differs significantly from "snowball" sampling. Snowball sampling is open-ended in that anyone can nominate a prospective subject. Thus, the probability that a person will be nominated cannot be calculated. This technique, therefore, fails to meet the essential requirements of any probability sample. Multiplicity sampling, however, is a valid technique that specifically adjusts for multiple probabilities of nomination through appropriate counting rules and weights. Thus, the sampling weight assigned to a multiplicity-nominated job seeker was contingent upon the total number of children or siblings who could have nominated that person. Consequently, multiplicity sampling has a statistical rigor not available with snowball or other non-probability techniques. (In future analysis we hope to examine the difference in those identified through multiplicity nomination and those identified through random digit dialing.)

After being screened and identified as eligible, respondents were interviewed over the telephone by interviewers trained and supervised by the Louis Harris firm. The interview which lasted about 30 minutes, attempted to elicit baseline information and to operationalize the elements suggested by the conceptual model. Data collection began November, 1980 and continued through June, 1981. During this period a total of over

25,000 households were screened for potentially eligible respondents. All this screening resulted in the identification of only 314 active job seekers aged 50 or over. Of these 33 refused to respond and another three respondents terminated the interview in mid-course. This low refusal rate (11%) reflects the high interest job seekers had in being able to discuss their current situation. Many respondents expressed their appreciation at having someone listen to their experiences and pay attention to their opinions. At the present time these 278 persons are in the process of being recontacted six months after their initial contact.

Preliminary Findings

We have just received the first marginal tabulations of the Time I data based on the 278 completed interviews. In the absence of Time II data or more detailed cross-tabular analysis we are limited on the kinds of conclusions which can be drawn. Furthermore, we have not yet applied sampling weights to the data. Thus, the final distributions will probably differ by a few percentage points from that reported herein. Nonetheless, some observations regarding the characteristics and needs of older job seekers seems justified at this time.

With respect to demographic characteristics (Table 1) it is noteworthy that slightly over half of job seekers 50 or over are women. Undoubtedly, this reflects the continuing rise of female labor force participation

in mid and late life. It is reasonable to assume that some of these women are re-entering the labor force after a considerable period of absence. In further analysis we will pay attention to the special job seeking skills and needs of women who have no recent job seeking experience.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

It should also be noted that not all older job seekers are out of work. Over one in five currently hold either a full or part time job which they are either seeking to change or supplement. Differences between these two types of job seekers will be examined.

While the vast majority of older job seekers rated their health as excellent or good a sizable proportion said it was only fair or poor. Furthermore, one-third said they suffered from a health or physical condition that limited the amount or kind of work they could do. The job search of these latter individuals will be given special attention.

In general, an examination of the demographic characteristics of older job seekers highlights the wide degree of heterogeneity within this group. Clearly, observations based on the abstract notion of "older worker" must be tempered by an awareness of the divergent subgroups included under this label. For example, one must be aware of the different needs and motivations of the 55 year old job seeker who is the major wage earner in the family with those of the 68 year old who may only be interested in a modest supplement to their retirement income. Note that 22% of the

Table 1

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF JOB-SEEKERS 50+

(N= 278)

AGE	(%)
50 - 54	32
55 - 59	37
60 - 64	17
65 - 69	10
70+	4
SEX	
Male	47
Female	53
RACE	
White	85
Black	11
Other	4
MARITAL STATUS	
Married	63
Widowed	17
Divorced/Separated	18
Never married	2
EDUCATION	
Less than 8th grade	8
8th Grade	10
Some high school	19
High school graduate	31
Some college	16
College graduate	7
Some post-graduate	9
EMPLOYMENT STATUS	
Not working	78
Working full-time	12
Working part-time	10

USUAL OCCUPATION	(%)
Professional	17
Managerial	8
Proprietor, (small business)	1
Clerical worker	19
Sales	6
Skilled craftsman	12
Unskilled laborer	21
Service worker	12
Farm worker	1
HOUSEHOLD INCOME (1979)	
Less than 5,000	21
5,000 to 10,000	26
10,001 to 15,000	17
15,001 to 20,000	14
20,001 to 25,000	8
25,001 or over	14
HOUSEHOLD INCOME SOURCES	
Social Security	22
Pension	16
LABOR UNION MEMBER	23
LIMITING HEALTH CONDITION	35
HEALTH RATING	
Excellent	31
Good	40
Fair	24
Poor	5

respondent households receive social security and another 16% receive pensions. Such differences in income sources need to be further explored.

In order to assess the value placed upon work, respondents were asked to rate the importance of seven commonly given reasons for work. (Table 2) The two reasons given the highest importance were "The feeling of being useful" and "The income" provided by work. From these data one might conclude that non-economic motivations equal, if not exceed the importance of economic incentives. However, such a conclusion must be further examined in light of responses the job seekers had given to an earlier open-ended question. This question asked simply "Could you tell me what are your reasons for wanting to work?" Without prompting, 90% indicated the need for income. No other response came close to the frequency with which income was mentioned. In the final analysis, we hope to combine both the open-ended and closed ended responses in developing a meaning of work measure.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

We were also interested in identifying the sources older job seekers relied upon in order to find job openings (Table 3). We asked respondents whether during their current job search they had attempted to find out about potential jobs from a variety of sources. By and large, it was found

Table 2

REASONS FOR WANTING TO WORK AMONG JOB SEEKERS 50+ (1)

(N= 278)

Reason for Working	Very Important %	Somewhat Important %	Not Important %	Not Sure %
The feeling of being useful	84	9	3	3
The income	77	21	1	1
The work itself	70	19	5	7
The respect of others	67	19	10	4
Having things happening around you	54	24	17	6
Being with people at work	50	28	19	4
Having a fixed schedule every day	46	22	27	4

1) Based on response to the following question; "People have given us some of their reasons for wanting to work. How important to you is (READ EACH ITEM) as a reason for wanting to work? Is it very important, somewhat important, or not important?

that older job seekers relied heavily on "traditional" job information sources. Very few had used a specialized placement service for older workers or any of the voluntary organizations an older person might belong to. It is unclear whether this low utilization reflects unawareness of these services or their limited availability. Preliminary comparisons of these findings with Bureau of the Census data suggests that our respondents were less likely to apply to employers directly than are younger job seekers. This is noteworthy in light of the fact that applying to employers directly has been found by the Census Bureau to have the highest effectiveness rate of the 20 job seeking strategies they examined.[1]

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

A basic issue concerns the kind of job older persons are looking for. We were, therefore, interested in identifying the job conditions important to older job seekers and what conditions would prompt them to accept or turn down a job (Table 4). We were struck with the high degree of flexibility expressed by the job seekers regarding the nature of jobs they would be willing to accept. For example, the overwhelming majority would accept either full or part-time work, work different from what they have been used to doing, work requiring overtime, seasonal work, evening work, and work requiring them to stand most of the time. A majority said they would be willing to take a job which paid less than

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1. See Occupational Outlook Quarterly, Winter, 1976.

Table 3

SOURCES CHECKED FOR JOB-OPENINGS DURING CURRENT JOB SEARCH

(N= 278)

Sources Checked	Percent
Newspaper/Magazine Ads	87
Friend or Relatives	76
State Employment Agency	56
Employers[1]	49
Radio or TV Ads	41
Private Employment Agencies	24
Unions	10
Placement Service for Older Workers	9
Senior Citizen Groups or Clubs	9
Social Service Agencies	8
Religious Groups	6
Political Organizations	5
Veteran Groups	4
Fraternal Lodges	1
Nationality/Ethnic Groups	1

1. Checking directly with employers to find out whether or not there were any job openings.

what they had previously earned. The areas where older job seekers expressed their greatest reservations were jobs requiring them to move from where they live now, regularly having to travel out-of-town, and having to travel more than one hour to get to the job. This emphasizes the importance of maintaining community roots and the hardship of travel for many older job seekers. Whether their flexibility augers well for eventual success or indicates a lowering of expectations and early signs of discouragement remains to be seen. INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

With respect to the job seekers expectancy of finding work, the preliminary findings are somewhat mixed. When asked what they would do if they hadn't found a job in six months the vast majority said they would definitely continue looking (75%) or probably continue (15%). Yet, over half, 55%, said they thought their chances of finding a job during the next month were less than 50-50. When asked about their chances over the next six months, one quarter or 24% said they still thought it was less than 50-50. To some extent their pessimism may be related to their beliefs about the job search they are engaged in (Table 5). The vast majority see themselves competing with many applicants for a small number of job openings. Although they see themselves to be at least as qualified as younger competitors, 84% agree their age will be a definite handicap in finding a job. Over half, 53%, felt they had already encountered actual age discrimination during their current job search.

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Table 4

WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT JOBS WITH SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS

(N= 278)

Job Characteristic	Probably Accept (%)	Probably Turn Down (%)	Not Sure (%)
Full-time Work	90	9	1
That you would do different work than you are used to	84	7	9
Regularly working overtime	79	19	2
Standing most of the time	75	23	3
Part-time work	73	21	7
Seasonal work	72	25	3
Evening or night work	67	30	3
Working in a place that you could not reach by public transportation	64	33	3
Being paid less that what you made on your last job	61	28	11
Frequently lifting twenty pounds or more	61	37	2
Reducing your Social Security or pension benefits	48	32	20
Regularly having to travel out of town	48	45	6
Taking more than one hour to get to	47	45	8
Moving from where you live right now	28	65	8

1. Based on response to following question; "Some people place restrictions on the kinds of jobs they will accept. What about yourself? Let's say you were offered an acceptable job but it meant (READ EACH ITEM). Would you probably accept it or probably turn it down if it meant (REREAD EACH ITEM)?

Table 5

SELECTED OPINIONS HELD BY JOB-SEEKERS 50+

(N= 278)

	Agree Strongly %	Agree Somewhat %	Not Sure %	Disagree Somewhat %	Disagree Strongly %
JOB AVAILABILITY					
In the surrounding area there are many job openings for the type of work I am looking for...	8	8	2	18	64
There are a lot of people looking for jobs like the one I'm interested in.....	55	19	7	10	8
AGE SALIENCE					
I'm as qualified as most younger people looking for jobs like the one I'm interested in.....	79	14	1	3	3
Finding a job will be harder because of my age...	64	20	1	7	8
JOB SEEKING EFFORT & ABILITY					
There isn't much more I can do that I haven't done already about finding a job.....	44	25	2	17	12
It is difficult for me to sell myself effectively in job interviews.....	16	18	6	21	39
TRAINING INTEREST					
I would be interested in taking a brief course on how to go about getting a job.....	39	24	2	16	18
I would be interested in a training program to improve or upgrade my skills in my usual occupation.....	53	23	4	18	12
I would be interested in being trained for a new occupation.....	53	24	5	7	10

The majority feel that they have done about all they could about finding a job. However, a sizable minority, 30%, disagreed and felt they could do more. Similarly, most felt they had no difficulty in effectively selling themselves during job interviews. Again, a sizable minority, 34%, acknowledged their difficulty in this area of job seeking skill. Recognizing a need for upgrading their job seeking skills, over half or 53%, expressed interest in a brief training course on how to go about getting a job. Even greater proportions were interested in such training which would enable them to upgrade their current job skills (76%) or to aquire skills necessary for entry into an entirely new career (77%).

Conclusion

Retirement policy in recent years has increasingly focused on extending the working life of older persons. To a large extent this interest has been promoted by the escalating costs of social security and other retirement income programs. Other factors which are seen as leading to a desire for an extended worklife include increased longevity, better health, more education, higher occupational levels and also continuing inflation. Most proposals for worklife extention focus on ways of prolonging employed workers' tenure at their current jobs (e.g. Work in America, 1980). It is our contention that special attention should also be placed on the needs of the displaced job seeker. Having lost the protection of seniority they have

fewer options available to them than employed older workers.

The preliminary data presented suggests that older job seekers can benefit from enhanced job seeking skills. A majority expressed a willingness to be trained in these skills. Even greater numbers expressed interest in training for second careers and for skill upgrading. Further efforts could fruitfully be directed to identifying optimal training approaches, the role of group supports in the job search and career change, and the potential contribution of higher education to extending the work-life of older persons.

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